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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH<sup>1</sup>

BY F. M. COLBY

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JAMES GALLATIN began his diary on March 12, 1813, a few days before his father, Albert Gallatin, was appointed one of the three commissioners to Russia for the negotiation of peace with England, the two others being Bayard and John Quincy Adams. Though only sixteen years old, he was his father's private secretary on that mission and all through the difficult negotiations that led to the Treaty of Ghent. He held the same position during his father's ministry in France from 1815 to 1823, and his special mission to England in 1826-27. Throughout these fourteen years his entries, though irregular, are detailed and intimate. The diary closes on October 9, 1827.

Young Gallatin deified his father, but had a sharp enough eye for the foibles of other people, and his remarks on the important personages he was thrown with are shrewd and often amusing. He gives us some new glimpses of the cantankerous John Quincy Adams.

Oct. 24, 1813.

After a stormy interview with Mr. Adams (Adams was the storm) father has decided to take his own course.

This was during the attempt to secure Russian mediation. As commissioner in the negotiations with England, Adams was worse yet, having Clay as well to quarrel with.

July 15, 1814.

Nothing to do. Mr. Adams in a very bad temper. Mr. Clay annoys him. Father pours oil on the troubled waters. I am now reading a history of the Low Countries. . . . The women are so ugly here. . . . We had waffles for breakfast—it reminded me of home. It seems they are an old Dutch dish. . . .

<sup>1</sup> *A Great Peace-Maker; The Diary of James Gallatin.* Charles Scribner's Sons. New York, 1914.

Again we find Clay using "strong language" to Adams, who "returns the compliment," while "father looks calmly on with a twinkle in his eye"; further trouble because Adams insisted on making the first draft of the treaty; another "long and angry discussion" between Adams and Clay; and Adams and Clay "objecting to everything" that they do not suggest themselves.

Dec. 7.

An answer refusing to accept this proposition received to-day. More discussion, everlasting bickering, and matters delayed. Father can no longer support Mr. Adams; he has tried his patience too far.

In 1821, when the elder Gallatin was Minister to France and Adams had become Secretary of State, the diarist resumes his comments on him, referring to his "very disagreeable communications," "Yankee tricks," and "petty and annoying" interference. Young Gallatin believed he was venting "his spleen on father for his imaginary grievances at Ghent."

He certainly is an impossible person. He is not a man of great force or intelligence, but his own opinion of himself is immense. I really think father, in a covert way, pulls his leg. I know he thinks little of his talents and less of his manners.

On the contrary, he was quite sure that Adams had "in his heart of hearts a very strong opinion of father's ability." From the notes on Adams it would seem that the elder Gallatin had quite accurately taken the measure of him as a member of a very familiar class of social tormentors. They aim at being reformers whose merits posterity will discover, but succeed in being inopportunist whom posterity mercifully forgets. As to Clay, "father" regarded him "as simply an obstinate fire-brand who is not capable of grasping or dealing with a subject without prejudice."

The comments of a light-minded and very susceptible youth on the various celebrities he encountered are naturally rather trivial at times. Having a keen sense of immediate social values, he experienced, like the usual memoir-writer, a sort of buck-fever on meeting famous persons, with the result that what he says has sometimes no meaning whatever to the present generation. There is a good deal about how the king looked and the queen smiled, and the prince said it was a pleasant day. "Prince Talleyrand was present, the Duc de Rohan, Duchesse de Courland (niece of Talleyrand, who seems devoted to him), Duc and Duchesse de Duras, the Galitzins, Caumont la Forces," and so

on—a dozen more names—and concluding, "The Duke was in fine spirits and received congratulations on all sides."

Yet there is less of this than one would expect, and indeed it contrasts most favorably in this respect with the memoirs and reminiscences of the present day. To judge from the mass of these writings, it would seem that snobbishness is on the increase, for surely there never was a time when so many large volumes of undesirable recollections could find a sale as now. Distinguished men and women by the scores turn their thoughts to the past and record lovingly the smallest talk they can find there. If they are not distinguished, they tell with amazing particularity how they shook the hands of those who were. Of course one does not expect a volume of memoirs to grapple the attention like a masterpiece of fiction. It is the sort of reading that admits of book-marks. Yet who has not read during the last ten years reminiscences of court life, queens, dukes, and people who have met Tennyson, when the mind was turned loose to wander forty years at a time? It is usually a handsome volume with gilt edges and weighing about four pounds. From the frontispiece of *Something Castle* to the portrait of *Somebody* with side-whiskers there is a stretch that could be read by a normal person only in a prison-cell. If there is anything to look at, your attention is gone for an hour, and if a fly gets into the room your heart goes out to him. At the end of the evening you are well posted on the fly and still unacquainted with his Highness. To one distinguished person whose memory is preserved in current volumes of reminiscences there are a hundred whose memories are dissolved. What is left of their once strong characters cannot as a center of interest compete with the ticking of a clock. When Thackeray jeered at "fashionable fiddle-faddle and feeble court slip-slop," it was for the most part merely talked, but nowadays it is gathered and bound into fine stout volumes which are sold to Americans for three dollars apiece.

It is not true, as excited reviewers are exclaiming, that Gallatin's *Diary* is to be ranked with the books of Samuel Pepys or Benvenuto Cellini or that it abounds in "wisdom in human nature," but it is certainly a marked exception to the present rule. Among the personages on whom the young diarist comments more or less familiarly are Napoleon Bonaparte, with whom his father had an unpleasant interview during the Hundred Days; the Duke of Wellington, Alexander of Russia, Louis XVIII., the Duke of Berri, whose assassination

young Gallatin witnessed and describes; Talleyrand, Castle-reagh, Alexander von Humboldt, Madame de Staël, a relative and great admirer of his father, whom she consulted about her American property; Lafayette, Madame Patterson-Bonaparte, who called her husband the "Corsican blackguard"; John Jacob Astor, who "ate his ice-cream and peas with a knife"; Count d'Orsay, Madame Récamier, George Canning, Charles Greville, Pozzo di Borgo, Châteaubriand—in short no small part of the entries in a dictionary of biography. Guesses, tittle-tattle, scandal, his own successes with women, accounts of balls, routs, drinking-parties, gambling, guillotining, practical jokes—everything is jotted down without discrimination or discretion, save as it might reflect on his father or the glory of the Gallatin family. Those two subjects are sacred.

Albert Gallatin's opinion of Napoleon was expressed in a letter to Jefferson, November 27, 1815, which illustrates, by the way, the writer's imperfect command of English:

Our opinion of Bonaparte is precisely the same. In that Lafayette's and the opinion of every friend of rational liberty did coincide. The return of that man was generally considered by them a curse. . . . I lament to see our republican editors so much dazzled by extraordinary actions or carried away by natural aversion to our only dangerous enemy as to take up the cause of that despot and conqueror, and to represent him as the champion of liberty who has been her most mortal enemy, where hatred to republican systems was founded on the most unbounded selfishness and on the most hearty contempt for mankind. I really wish that you would permit me to publish, or rather that you would publish your opinions on that subject.

The meeting with Napoleon, above mentioned, occurred on March 30, 1815:

The audience at 10.30 this morning. I am not to go. . . . Father was not at all pleased with his interview. He says that the Emperor is brusque—that his speech is most vulgar. Joseph Bonaparte was present. I had better quote father's own words: "The Emperor first asked my advice on important financial matters, to which I gave my frank opinion. He then began to question me about Canada, also the slave trade. I replied, 'Sire, my position is such that on these subjects my lips are at present sealed.' He abruptly said, 'Then why did you come here?' Bowing, I answered, 'I obeyed your Majesty's command out of respect for the ruler of France, but as an envoy from the United States to England I am not my own master.' The Emperor, turning his back on me, walked to a window; I having backed out of the room, so ended our interview."

But more characteristic of this youthful record than these grave matters are:

I was presented to a Madame Chapelle last night at the opera. She is a daughter of the Regent Orléans and Madame de Genlis. She is not pretty, but has great charm of manner—a *grande dame*. . . . Katinka Galitzin is pretty and full of fun; we get on capitally. . . . We had just commenced to sup when I heard a noise in the ante-chamber. My charmer exclaimed, "*Mon Dieu, je suis perdue, cachez-vous.*" I rushed behind a curtain. The door opened, and to my dismay I recognized the voice of the Duc de Berri. . . . We heated franks and sous in the fire and threw them out of the window and watched the poor devils scramble for them, only to burn their fingers. . . . Madame Bonaparte talks of nothing else but "Bo," her son, and his marriage. As he is now only a fat boy, it is a little premature. . . .

July 4, New York.

A horrible day here; the noise of July 4 celebration intolerable. . . . The streets absolutely filthy and the heat horrible. No roads—no paths. I never realized the absolutely unfinished state of the American cities until I returned. The horrible chewing of tobacco—the spitting; all too awful.

In short, it is an admirable diary, full of trifles typical of class and period, superficial, careless, inadvertently illuminating. It owes its present value to the fact that its writer never stopped to think. The best diarists are those who never think. They must swim with the currents of their day, unresisting. Had Benvenuto Cellini had a grain of philosophy, a hundred charming pages would have been deleted, and what a mercy it was to posterity that Samuel Pepys never had a second thought. The good diarist should have a mind like a sun-dial, always in the same place, contributing nothing of its own, and anecdotes that delighted him at fifteen should continue to amuse him at fifty. The least reflection on the vanity of his subject would detract from his accuracy in social registration.

F. M. COLBY.